



THE NEW SHOFAR

Will 2020 be any different to 2019?

What God wants is more than belief. God wants faith.

Advent 4

Faith Vs Fear

Out of context, our short reading from Isaiah does not hit home as much as it should. King Ahaz ruled over the Kingdom of Judah that appears to have come to an end. More importantly, it appears as though he will be the last of the Davidic kings. He is worried about the survival of the promise Yahweh made to David, that his line will go on until the End. The nation is under attack from Syria and from the Northern nations and if the City falls, with it goes the king and the covenant.

He is afraid. What does he do? Turn to the God who made the covenant? Listen to the prophet's words from God and trust in divine providence? Alternatively, he could ready the City for a siege and seek help from the Assyrians with their mighty armies. It is the latter he chooses. He is prepared to accommodate God's people to the ways of the pagans, all in the vague hope of finding a way around the immanent war. He will sell out the covenant with God for an earthly compromise.

We need a right faith and a deep trust

To understand the prophet we need to observe how he does not speak of "belief". It is "faith" God seeks. Ahaz is not being asked for a public expression of Israel's creeds. What is demanded of him are acts inspiring faith and trust in God. God does not want more sacrifices. What God wants is for the king to place the future unfolding of the Covenant into divine hands and to give up trying to shape it in ways he thinks are best. He needs to live his faith and not simply confirm a set of beliefs. Live as though the victory of God was already upon them is what the prophet teaches. Give witness to an underlying reality – even if the enemies of Jerusalem are victorious in war and capture the City the covenant will not grind to an end. It is God who sustains it and all that is demanded in return is a radical life of a faith that extends beyond mere belief.

Immanuel : God-is-with-us now and forever, in all things, through all things

The name given by the prophet to the child to be born is Immanuel, a name that is positive and reassuring. Even though things look grim, this young woman will give birth to a child. There is a future beyond the wars and violence. The enemies of God are not greater than the divine promises. The child is a concrete reminder of God's faithfulness. Whenever they see the child in their midst, they are to be uplifted in perseverance. God is present in, with and for Israel. He is their defender, guardian and protector and so why would Israel be afraid? The psalmist puts it well...*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble...the Lord of Hosts is with us...(Psalm 46...)*.

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If we go back to **verse 9** we can see just how clear God has been. Through the prophet Isaiah, Yahweh tells the king...*if you do not stand by me, you will not stand at all.* Israel and so the Church of today, our own parish and Diocese will not stand, will not endure to the End if we do not stand by God in a **right faith and a sure hope.** Now is the time to re-make that commitment.

Matthew takes up the prophesy from Isaiah

The Church quite early on took up the prophesy from Isiah to Ahaz and saw in it the promise made by God to Abraham. The sins of humankind are being forgiven and a new creation is beginning in and through the saving activities of God. The proof of that prophesy is to be found in the child born of the virgin Mary. The Spirit of God who had hovered over the darkness and the deep at the time of creation, is once again shown to be at work, in an action that is as amazing as were the first creative acts of God. This time it will be through the faith and trust of a young woman who is yet to finalise her marriage. She is a most unlikely source of the kind of cosmos transforming power that is on promise. By meditating on the mystery of *God-at-work* in this vulnerable virgin in a remote part of Palestine, we are given an insight into the ways of God.

God is with us – Immanuel...God delivers us – Jesus

We know God is very much with us when we live in Jesus, when we live as Jesus lived. It is when we strive to become more and more Christlike that we understand the meaning of “being saved”. As king Ahaz had no chance of defeating his northern enemies in battle, so too, men and women are unable to resist the power of evil in the world. What God builds us, Satan tears down and uses human beings in these works of destruction. But Satan is not the source of life for creation. When Christ returns at the End, the Evil One will be thrown into the pit of burning sulphur.

Matthew writes his Gospel to a people who very much feel they are at war with a world that does not believe, by nations that would rather trust in the power of the Caesars than the power of God. The faith communities of the disciples of Christ were forged in the crucible of persecution. They had to make difficult decisions – trust God or trust the ways of men. With so many of their neighbours believing and worshipping the gods of this world, remaining faithful was dangerous.

Salvation – being saved from something in order to live for something

New Testament theology is fundamentally uncomplicated. It is founded in the crucified Jesus of Nazareth who was raised from the grave on the third day (as God’s anointed One) and who now ministers from the side of God in heaven. God reigns in Jesus the Christ. **Note:** He reigns now or in more biblical language – Jesus *is reigning* in our world. Jesus/Joshua continues to deliver us from helplessness, from sin and from death. We live within the grace of God when we live in Christ. The more we engage with Jesus the Christ in our everyday activities, the more Jesus reigns in us.

Even more important, the transformation of the world has been achieved through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Here is the rub: it only becomes a reality others can experience when we live in right faith and a deep trust. If the world is rejecting Jesus as their saviour and redeemer, the reason for that rejection comes back to each and every one of us. The world can *taste and see the good things of the Lord* through their encounters with we who profess to believe. This is not about convincing the world through good theology and powerful

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arguments. It is about living the faith. It is all about trusting in God's merciful and loving care for us as we *walk through the valley of the shadow of death* in whatever form that takes.

And how has Advent worked out for us (self and parish)?

One way the Church offers us assistance with this call to repent and to renew our lives in Christ is the season of Advent. What might it suggest if we (parish and individuals) have not undertaken steps towards renewing ourselves under the Spirit for the work in the world assigned to us by God?